

Main Entrance, St Stephens Church



These five circular history walks have been designed to highlight the rich history and beautiful green spaces in the area south of St Albans called Sopwell. Sopwell, named after the 12th century nunnery where the nuns lived on bread and water (sops), became a manor in medieval times.

The project to research Sopwell's early history and collect more recent local memories for the benefit of future generations was begun by the Sopwell Residents Association (SRA) in 2009. The amount of material generated resulted, in 2012, in a self-published book *Sopwell a history and collection of memories* by Sandy Norman. ISBN: 978-0-9567399-1-9. It was on the strength of this original research, carried out with minimal help and resources, that SRA was awarded £10,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund All Our Stories Project. The money has been used to build a website www.sopwellmemories.org.uk and to produce these leaflets.

The book is on sale in St Albans at Waterstones bookshop, St Albans Museum and Tourist Information Centre and Sopwell House hotel, price: £15.00. It may also be ordered online via the link on the Sopwell Residents Association website: www.sra.org.uk



Lectern, St Stephens Church



Sopwell History Walks



Walk 5

The Norman Connection

Approx Distance
2.3 miles / 3.7 kilometres

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The Norman Connection

There is limited car parking at the top of Mandeville Drive near the garages or street parking in Abbots Avenue West.

1. Start in Mandeville Drive by the school. Mandeville JMI School was built in 1951 on land which originally belonged to St Julian's farm. Walk up towards the garages and continue straight on to enter the footpath between Tavistock Avenue and Maynard Drive. This footpath is an ancient one and was there before the houses and roads were built. There used to be stiles at either end crossing fields. At the end of the path, turn left, cross the top of Doggetts Way, and enter another footpath through to Wilshire Avenue. These two roads were built in 1931 on agricultural land leading down to the gas works and the railway.
2. Cross over Wilshire Avenue and into the Close leading to Praetorian Court. Turn right into the field, keeping to the left of the children's playground. This is St Stephens's field, a beautiful green space with some of our most ancient trees. Walk diagonally across, past the pond, heading towards the large cedar tree on the other side of the valley. Until recently it was thought that this tree was over 500 years old and rumoured to be the tree where Henry VIII courted Anne Boleyn. However, it is now estimated to have been planted in 1750. It is a fine specimen of its kind nevertheless.
3. Walk into the wooded area behind the dog waste bin and follow a path which leads to St Stephen's church. St Stephen's is the oldest church in Sopwell. It stands on the corner of the old Roman road of Watling Street and St Stephen's Hill and it was one of three built to cover the various approaches to the town and provide facilities for pilgrims to the Abbey, the others being St Michael's and St Peter's. The original church, built by Abbot Ulsinus in AD 948, was built on a Roman burial site. This was replaced in the 12th century by a Norman construction, parts of which still remain. In 1220 under the then Abbot, William Trumpington, a Lady Chapel was added. There were no more important changes until 1860, when restoration work was necessary to repair the crumbling church. It boasts the oldest font in St Albans, dated 1350. Another feature is a brass lectern in the shape of an eagle; the current one is a replica, given to the church by the Scottish people in 1995. The story of how the original lectern made its way to St Albans and back to Scotland is fascinating. It was gifted to Scotland by Pope Alexander VI in 1498 and taken to Holyrood Abbey where it remained until 1544. It was then taken as booty by Sir Richard Lee's English Army during a foray into Scotland. Lee, who owned much of Sopwell at the time, gave it to Stephen's. During the Civil War, it disappeared, and was found in a tomb of the Montague family in the mid-18th century, having been placed there for safe keeping. Meanwhile, the Scots wanted it returned to Scotland and many unfruitful approaches were made to the church for it to be restored. In 1972, there was an attempt to steal it and it suffered damage when part of the base was taken. In 1982, it was agreed by the Church of England to loan it to Edinburgh as part of an exhibition of medieval Scottish art. Many patriotic Scots were annoyed when it was returned to St Albans and so took the law into their own hands and stole it back, in 1984, saying it was being returned to its rightful home. It remained hidden somewhere in Scotland after that but was the subject of much heated debate. In 1995, a replica was presented to St Stephen's in the hope that this would persuade those holding the real lectern to release it. In 1999 the lectern was anonymously delivered to an arts centre on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, and in 2005 a court of the Church of England decided that the lectern, known as the Holyrood Bird, could be loaned permanently to the National Museum of Scotland. The lectern seen today in St Stephens's church is the 150-year-old replica.
4. In the churchyard, note the horse chestnut in churchyard which is another ancient tree. Exit the churchyard into Watling Street. Watling Street, which was the main highway from London, at one time continued in a straight line towards the Abbey. The monks of the Abbey had it diverted down St Stephen's Hill and up Holywell Hill to the town, no doubt for the purposes of bringing more trade to the town. The original Watling Street must have passed through where the King Harry pub is and down through Verulamium. Walk down Watling Street away from the junction and the pub. Further down the road on the opposite side, there was once a leper hospital dedicated to St Julian. It was founded in the 12th

- century by Abbot Geoffrey and originally housed six lepers. This hospital was for men. There was another one at St Mary's at Prae for the women. When the hospital declined in the 16th century, the land reverted to farmland: St Julian's farm. Until the Tithe Barn estate was built, there was a 14th century tithe barn there.
5. Cross Vesta Avenue and pass St Bartholomew's Roman Catholic Church on your left. This church was opened in 1964. 'St Bart's' is thought to be situated on the site of the church of the leper hospital.
 6. The hill going down to Park Street roundabout is known as St Julian's Hill. The parallel road to the left is a continuation of Watling Street. These house were used by American army officers during the Second World War. Walk to the end of this road and enter the cut-through to Coningsby Bank. This has another lovely green space with views across the North Orbital road and the roundabout. Follow the road round until you reach Holyrood Crescent.
 7. Turn left, and walk up Watling View, passing Watling View and St Adrian's schools on the right. Watling View is a school for children and young people with severe learning difficulties. St Adrian's, built in 1960, is a Catholic faith JMI school. The houses on the left of Watling View replaced the post-war prefabs in 1972.
 8. At the top of Watling View, continue past the shops in Vesta Avenue. Follow the road round into Tavistock Avenue and continue until it opens out into a green on the left. Here, turn left and take the foot/cycle path back to Mandeville Drive. In Vesta Avenue there was a greater variety of shops than there are now. At one time, there was a shoe repairers, a grocer, a greengrocer, a butcher and a chemist. There also used to be a hardware store, a bread shop, a frozen food shop. The shops used to close from 1pm to 2pm for lunch and at midday on Thursdays. The houses in Tavistock Avenue were built in 1934.

Walk 5

Approx Distance
2.3 miles
3.7 kilometres

Key: ——— walk

